

of agricultural work, a sector that, with the growth of long-distance migration and the employment of casual, poorly regulated labor for cheap food production, is becoming an urgent issue for the contemporary world. But for now, it would be ungenerous to demand more from this substantial and stimulating book.

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YOUNG, Kathryn A. and Sarah M. McKINNON – *No Man's Land: The Life and Art of Mary Riter Hamilton*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2017. Pp. 272.

The title and subtitle of this somewhat sad account of the life and art of Canadian artist Mary Riter Hamilton (1868-1954) succinctly summarize its content. *No Man's Land* is the biography of a painter whose successes can broadly be associated with women and whose disappointments can largely be associated with men. For Hamilton, these came fast and furious. Married at twenty in 1889, her father died the following year; her only son was stillborn two years later; and her husband died barely a year later. With what little money she inherited, she graduated from millinery and china painting to a noteworthy career as a professional artist, which this book documents in detail. Determined to succeed, Hamilton travelled west from Ontario to British Columbia in search of a living and voyaged east to Europe in search of training and meaningful subject matter.

The book is the product of extensive research begun more than thirty years ago by Winnipeg educator Angela E. Davis (1924-1994), to whom the book is dedicated. It divides broadly into three parts. Much of the early part of Hamilton's story is set against the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century British Columbia, Manitoba, and Ontario provincial and municipal art worlds of ladies' teas, private teaching, and intimate exhibitions. This section also includes a helpful and extensive analysis of Hamilton's long period of study in Europe. The second part focuses on the six-year First World War art project that obsessed her, while the third part documents the artistic and mental unravelling that subsequently dogged her until her death at the age of eight-five—impoverished—in 1954.

For those of us used to associating First World War art with the cementing of national identity through battle achievements like Vimy Ridge (1917) and the postwar success of the Group of Seven, Hamilton's story forms a necessary and important corrective by showing us how gendered that achievement really was. Compare Hamilton's biography with A. Y. Jackson's, for example. He was a near contemporary, and, like Hamilton, his beginnings were relatively humble; he went to work young in the commercial art business. To improve his skills, like Hamilton, he studied in Europe and, also like her, dreamed of earning his living as a professional artist. A First World War commission from the Canadian War Memorials Fund (CWMF) as an official war artist launched his career as a painter and thereafter he mixed usefully with prime ministers, businessmen, gallery and

museum directors, and collectors. Before the war, the clearly accomplished and attractive Hamilton was already mixing with the wives of such people but although they were supportive and happy to pour the tea at her exhibition openings, the usefulness of their sphere of influence in forwarding her career was minimal when contrasted with Jackson's successes. The CWMF turned down her application in 1917.

Nevertheless, the book is careful to show how much of Hamilton's lack of success was of her own making even if it cannot evidentially always account for it. Knowing about her mental health at the end of her life suggests that perhaps some undiagnosed psychiatric condition earlier affected her life choices. Following her husband's death, until she was old when she chose Vancouver as her home, she never settled anywhere for long: in Canada, Victoria for seven years, Winnipeg variously for seven, three, and two years plus another single year; in Europe, Berlin for two and Paris and environs variously for three, four, and six years. Her work was likely affected by her peripatetic lifestyle, some of it being variously described by reviewers as unpolished (p. 61) and unfinished (p. 53).

Following the end of the First World War in 1918, with some limited support from the Amputation Club of British Columbia, Hamilton obsessively painted postwar battlefields for six years. In her mind, the resulting three hundred paintings were an act of honouring. For others, like the National Gallery of Canada, already burdened with nearly one thousand artworks from the CWMF program, Hamilton's offerings—a number unfinished—must have seemed like the straw that might break the camel's back. Furthermore, for an art scheme designed to showcase Canadian battlefield success in the interests of developing an independent national identity, and with a public that wanted to move forward from the tragedy of war, what role did mournful scenes of cemeteries, war detritus, and shattered homes and woods play? What is now Library and Archives Canada did agree to house Hamilton's collection, but it must have been a challenge: many of her compositions are painted on cardboard as Hamilton lacked the means to purchase good materials even if they had been available easily in the early postwar period.

The book avoids assessing Hamilton as an artist. Indeed, a stated goal is evidence-based social and women's history (p. 145). This is a significant omission for an artist biography, as it is on her reputation as an artist and not as an exemplar of social or women's history that Hamilton's reputation must stand. There is no doubt that some of her early paintings like *Maternity* (1905) are very strong, but the quality of the war work is questionable. Much of it is compositionally awkward with the paint's impasto suggesting a primitivist direction or, simply, deterioration in skill. The authors comment that her letter writing similarly declines between 1919 and 1925 (p. 95). Comparing her work with CWMF artist David Milne (1882-1953), who also was painting in Europe post-battle, might have been helpful in reaching a qualitative judgment. An intriguing suggestion that is not developed in the book relates to the extent Hamilton relied on photography for her war work (pp. 93-94). If she did, how did she use it? The comparison illustrated suggests that the photograph rather than the witnessed warscape in this case provided her

subject matter despite the photographic evidence of her sketching outdoors that comprises the cover of the book.

Finally, although they are mentioned in the main text, it is in the form of an appendix that the book allows us to compare Hamilton's career with that of other women artists of her generation working across the globe. Of those who are Canadian, for some, school teaching, marriage, and independent wealth supplemented painting income; for others, a CWMF commission cemented reputation. For Hamilton, all opportunities of this sort were thwarted in her own time. But her remarkable efforts on her own behalf have ensured that the evidence of her struggles survive in correspondence and collections. As a result, she is one of only a handful of these women to be the subject of a monograph—this book—thus to some degree rectifying art history's gender imbalance.

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